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## Female agency and the sacramental vision of early modern Catholicism

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Female Agency and the Sacramental Vision of Early Modern Catholicism

A Thesis

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BY

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## Introduction

Recent scholarship considering early modern English women – their lives, writings, concerns, and identities – has largely overlooked one particular group: English women who became nuns and were exiled to the Continent. The 2009 *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*<sup>1</sup>, for example, covers genres such as translations, letters and autobiography, and “sites of production” such as educational spaces, devotional spaces, royal courts, and healing spaces. While English nuns produced writing in all of these genres and spaces, they garner but a few oblique references in the nineteen essays included in the volume. This is unfortunate, because these women left copious writings detailing their daily lives, concerns, experiences, and identities. The documents they produced range from collections of letters and private papers, to translations with their own introductions, short biographies in the form of obituary notices, and detailed accounts of their communities, from their exile from England to France and Belgium in the late sixteenth century, to their flight back to England nearly two centuries later due to the upheavals of the French Revolution.

One reason for this oversight could be the inaccessibility of the sources, hidden away in convent archives. However, many of the texts began to be published by the Catholic Record Society as early as the beginning of the twentieth century and are further made available by initiatives such as Brown University's Women Writers Online. Another reason that we cannot ignore is what Lucy Wooding calls the “Whiggish legacy influencing our perceptions of the English Reformation”<sup>2</sup> or what Peter Marshall refers to as “inherited Protestant and nationalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Lunger Knoppers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, etc: The Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Lucy E.C. Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000,) 1.

assumptions”<sup>3</sup> which still influence the field and could cast English religious women’s writing as unimportant, uninteresting, or in some way “foreign” to the concerns of English literature and history.

The convent texts, however, are very much related to the broader controversies of the period, including the religious, social, and political. As scholars such as Claire Walker have demonstrated, the English convents on the Continent were in no way cut off from the concerns, circumstances, and disputes in England, even to the point of becoming involved in Royalist conspiracy. In addition, the nuns’ writings offer some insight into the impact of early modern Catholicism on women, their sense of identity, their autonomy and spirituality. In this current study, my main argument is that, beginning in the 1590’s, the re-establishment of monastic life on the Continent for Catholic English women afforded them an option for greater feminine autonomy, a particular expression of their spirituality, and the development of a sense of self less conditioned by male-dominated society. This was made possible due to the Catholic insistence on maintaining a sacramental vision of realities and the application of this perspective to the idea and practice of a duality in Christian lifestyles: sacramental marriage and celibate vocations.

To this end, this paper attempts to view English nuns of the early modern period in the context of the larger theological concerns regarding the sacramental vision of both marriage and vowed chastity, the Reformation disputes and alterations regarding marriage and monastic life, and the implications of these on female agency. I will do this by examining the development of the Christian doctrines of marriage and vowed chastity as well as the writings of English religious women about themselves which describe their motives for becoming nuns, their

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Marshall, “(Re)defining the English Reformation,” *The Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (July 2009): 565, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/600128>.

lifestyle in the monastic community, their goal of divine union, and their vision of the body, suffering, and death.

### **Sacramental “Habits of Thought”**

It is useful to understand to some degree what Debora Shugar calls the “habits of thought” present in early modern society. She asserts (I think correctly) that “we cannot approach a given period or its texts by disregarding the self-interpretation of that period.”<sup>4</sup> While some scholarship avoids or ignores the religious concerns of Renaissance England, or reinterprets them in materialist or political terms, Shugar argues that religion was “the primary language of analysis” and the “cultural matrix for explorations of virtually every topic: kingship, selfhood, rationality, language, marriage, ethics, and so forth.”<sup>5</sup> Religion, most importantly to the early moderns, mediated the person’s relationship with God and eternal salvation. Only if we understand the weight of this concern in the early modern mind, can we begin to grasp the vehemence with which people defended their particular confessional beliefs. What was at stake for the Renaissance believer was not just wealth, social position, or self determination, but eternal life. The present earthly life was considered temporal and brief, marching towards death, personal judgment before God, and entrance into the eternal glory of heaven (or possibly, in Catholic belief, a delayed entrance to heaven while one was purified in purgatory) or the eternal damnation in hell. The most pressing concern of earthly life, then, was to believe and practice “true religion” which would ensure heavenly reward. It was of course, the dispute about what constituted the true religion of Christianity – its beliefs, practices, structure, and way of viewing the world – that was central to the Reformation.

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<sup>4</sup> Debora Shugar, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

For the purposes of this paper, one of the most important aspects to consider about this particular religious climate is what Shuger terms the “sacramental/analogical character of premodern thought.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to scientific rationalism which so influences post-Enlightenment thought, this vision of realities “tends to deny rigid boundaries.”<sup>7</sup> In particular, when referring to matters of the spirit, the sacramental way of thinking posits that the invisible is communicated and made manifest through what is visible and physical. Or as Shugar puts it, “Nothing is simply itself, but things are signs of other things and one thing may be inside another, as Christ is *in* the heart, or turn into something else, as the substance of the eucharistic bread turns into the body of Christ.”<sup>8</sup> This thought pattern, while perhaps initially held by the majority of early moderns, was most intentionally and insistently maintained in the Catholic faith tradition with implications we shall explore later on. It was, in fact, a shifting of this habit of thought and its applications that at times marked out the lines of confessional divisions on specific issues.

This habit of thought applied in a particular way to the workings of the supernatural or divine in the life of the church and of individual members of the faithful. Since the Patristic era, Christian theologians had developed explanations of the sacramental economy of salvation by which the Church was constituted. That is, particular signs and rites (the seven sacraments) were held to be instituted by Christ himself to communicate the grace of redemption to Christians of all generations. According to this view of the *ekklesia*, the sacrament is “a sign that actually causes what it signifies”<sup>9</sup> made up of specific material elements which bear some underlying

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> David Bouke, Introduction to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 56 The Sacraments*. Transl. by David Bourke. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company and London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1974), xviii.

resemblance to the spiritual reality they communicate. Joined to the words of the rite (or the “form”), these sacramental signs effect what they signify. The work of Thomas Aquinas represents a further development of sacramental theology, teaching that the sacraments were designed to signify and bring about sanctification since they transmitted “the actual cause of our sanctification, which is the Passion of Christ, the form of our sanctification which consists in grace and the virtues, and the ultimate end which our sanctification is designed to achieve, which is eternal life.”<sup>10</sup> Invisible spiritual realities were indicated and brought about through material signs, since “a sign is something through which a person arrives at knowledge of some further thing beyond itself.”<sup>11</sup> This is, according to Thomistic theology, especially the case with the seven sacraments which derive their power from Christ, since “it is God who represents spiritual realities for us by sensible things in the sacraments, and by figurative words in the Scriptures.”<sup>12</sup> While the proper name of “sacrament” was reserved for the seven Christian rites of baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, confession, marriage, holy orders, anointing of the sick (also called extreme unction), the sacramental “habit of thought” was applied by medieval and early modern people to other realities as well. It constituted a particular way of seeing the world, circumstances, and events, which was not necessarily discouraged by Aquinas, though he differentiated between this sacramental vision from sacraments *per se*: “With regard to such created entities perceptible to the senses they signify something sacred, namely the divine wisdom and the divine goodness, inasmuch as these are sacred in themselves, but not inasmuch as we are sanctified by them.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, visible things contained a particular mystery or revelation of divine and spiritual things, though they did not bring about sanctification as did the

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 56 The Sacraments*, trans. David Bourke. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company and London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1974), 3a. 60, p.3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3a. 60, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3a. 60, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3a. 60, 2.

actual sacraments. This way of viewing and understanding the world in the early modern period represents for us the hermeneutic by which to understand the attitudes toward sacramental marriage and the “self-interpretation” of early modern religious women, their choices, and their spirituality.

### **Marriage and Virginity in the Sacramental Economy of the Church**

The sacramental habit of thought was in no way confined to the religious or spiritual, but seeped into nearly every aspect of daily life. It united the spiritual with the social precisely in the discernment and choice of a “state of life,” that is, embracing marriage or the celibate state. Christian virginity was an innovation and departure from Judaism, directed as it was towards the expectation of the birth of the Messiah. Celibate life was rare in Judaism, and marriage resulting in numerous children was considered a blessing from God. With Christianity, however, salvation was attained and the expectancy of the Savior now referred to the second coming, the full revelation of the kingdom of heaven. The gospel source of Christian virginity comes in reference to this whereby Christ declares: “some have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough, (and we will see this repeatedly in the Christian tradition) the initiation of a Christian state of life of vowed chastity occurred within the context of a discussion on marriage. Christ declared that marriage was indissoluble<sup>15</sup> to which the apostles were incredulous and Peter replied, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”<sup>16</sup> Without diminishing this high standard of perpetual marital fidelity, Christ affirmed the state “not to marry” (ie. to vow chastity) as a particular gift and calling saying: “Not all can

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 19:12 (New American Bible).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 19:4-9

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19:10



accept this word, but only those to whom that is granted.”<sup>17</sup> Spoken about together, Christian marriage and Christian virginity were counterparts, two ways of living the admonition to practice the “purity of heart” required “to see God.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul, of course, took up this theme in various passages referring to virginity and to marriage. On one hand, he clearly implies that virginity is “better” as it frees a person to focus all his or her energy and concern on the “things of the Lord.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he also emphasizes that marriage (and sexual relations within marriage) is not a sin and develops the aspect of marriage as a sacrament that reveals the love of Christ for the Church.<sup>20</sup> These passages from Paul were developed and expounded by the early Church fathers, many of whom wrote treatises on virginity and marriage. Once again, the fathers never speak of one without the other, a phenomenon that demonstrates the way in which the two were held as two counterparts which depended upon and informed each other.

Clement of Alexandria, writing towards the end of the second century, held that “celibacy and marriage have their distinctive services of the Lord, their different ministries”<sup>21</sup> and in both, moderation of the passions and self-control “leads to prayer.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, he argues that the sacramental aspect of marriage makes it holy, since (referring to Eph 5) it “points this mystery in the direction of Christ and the Church”<sup>23</sup> and images the spiritual union every person is called to “when the Lord’s words have brought the soul to God as a bride.”<sup>24</sup> He also emphasizes the Christocentric character of Christian marriage which differs from those who seek in marriage

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 19:11

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5:8.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:32 (New American Bible).

<sup>20</sup> Ephesians 5:32 (New American Bible).

<sup>21</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *Stromateis: Books One to Three*, trans. John Ferguson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991) 3.12.79(5) p.305.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.12.81(4), p.306.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.12.84(2), p.309.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.12.84(3), p.309.

“concord in the experience of pleasure” since “the marriage of true lovers of wisdom leads to a concord derived from the Logos.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, those who practice celibacy present freedom from excessive passion in a more radical way. This reminds all that “marriage must be kept pure, like a sacred object to be preserved from all stain.”<sup>26</sup> He seeks to confirm that if some could practice the radical chastity of celibacy, then others could practice the degree of chastity required in marriage since both take their meaning from the same mystery.

Gregory of Nyssa, himself married, wrote a treatise on virginity around the year 371. While he argues that virginity is the more blessed life, since it leaves one free for attention to spiritual things, marriage is also desirable for “the joy of living with someone.”<sup>27</sup> He writes against “disregarding the institution of marriage” since “this also is not deprived of God’s blessing.”<sup>28</sup> He claims however, that there is no need to make a special appeal for marriage, since many people are naturally inclined to it and recognize its benefits. Even in marriage “the zeal and desire for divine things come first, but...one should not scorn the moderate and measured use of the duty of marriage.”<sup>29</sup> The life of virginity presupposes marriage, since every person derives life from the union of a man and a woman and it is the sacramental married state which provides the imagery for the union of the soul with Christ who is the “incorruptible Bridegroom” of the one who has chosen virginity. Married people also need the witness of virgins who remind them that “Christ is all things for all human beings, the true lover of wisdom has as his goal the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2.23.143(1), p.253.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2.23.145(1), p. 254.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *On Virginity in Ascetical Work*. trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967.) 3, p.13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7, p.31.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 7 p.33.

divine One who is true wisdom, and the soul, clinging to its incorruptible Bridegroom, has a love of true wisdom which is God.”<sup>30</sup>

Even Augustine, whose view of sexuality tended towards rigorism, preceded his treatise on virginity with one entitled *De bono coniugali* (*The Good of Marriage*) written in 401 for the explicit purpose of not inclining his readership to think that marriage was degraded when he would subsequently produce his work on virginity. He points again to the sacramental sign of marriage, in its unity and indissolubility, as an image of faithful union between Christ and the Church. Moreover, marriage should not be based only on passion or affection; friendship and the “order of charity” should flourish between husband and wife<sup>31</sup> who “are joined to each other side by side [to] walk together and observe where they are walking.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, virgins may “prefer their blessing to marriage” but they “may not consider marriage an evil” since the truth of scripture attests that it comes from God and they must “let what is chaste be so loved that what is true is not denied.”<sup>33</sup>

Analyzing a similar selection of writings from the early Church fathers, Jo Ann McNamara argues that the option for a life of virginity in early Christian era lent itself to greater autonomy and equality for women. The fathers were committed to the teaching that all people, male and female, were spiritually equal before God. While marriage was a good, it was, in fact, the place where distinction between the sexes took place in the wife’s subjection to the husband

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 20, p.64.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine. *The Good of Marriage (De bono coniugali)* found in *Writings of St Augustine, vol. 15 in The Fathers of the Church, vol. 2.*, trans. Charles T. Wilcox, M.M. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955.) 12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine. *Holy Virginity* found in *Writings of St Augustine, vol. 15 in The Fathers of the Church, vol. 27.* Translated by Charles T. Wilcox, M.M. New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955. 18, p.161.

and “in the type of labor apportioned to each.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, marriage entailed the care of household and children, while the virgin could seek greater freedom for a life of holiness, study of divine things, and service to others and attain “the absolute equality which the two sexes enjoyed outside the limitations of marriage.”<sup>35</sup> While marriage was consistently defended against heretical sects, virginity was accorded a special place in the life of the early Church, as a valid option for both men and women and particularly valuable for establishing female autonomy.

The close conceptual ties between marriage and virginity continued to inform the development of spirituality and theology throughout the middle ages. The monks made use of spousal imagery through their treatises on the sacraments and scripture, in particular, the *Song of Songs*. Bernard of Clairvaux preached on the *Song* as a way to describe the relationship between God and the individual soul. In his work *De Sacramentis*, Hugh of St. Victor applied the *Song* specifically to Christian marriage. Finally, drawing on these sources, Innocent III wrote two important works on marriage: a treatise interpreting marriage according to the four levels of scriptural interpretation and a sermon on the anniversary of his consecration as pope in which he describes his relationship with the Church in spousal imagery. In the first, *On the Fourfold Types of Marriage*, Pope Innocent III

Treats four interpretations of marriage corresponding to the four levels of scriptural interpretation. The four unions are (1) union of the flesh, between a man and a woman (historical); (2) union of the body, between Christ and his Church (allegorical level); (3)

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<sup>34</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, “Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought,” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4. (1976): 148, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177733>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

union of the spirit, between God and the soul (tropological or moral level); (4) the union of the Person of Christ, between the Word and human nature (anagogical level).<sup>36</sup>

While these trends in medieval theological and spiritual writing promoted reflection on and positive development of attitudes towards marriage, there were concurrent attitudes, even within the same authors, that qualified the body as “carnal” (in a pejorative way) and emphasized the negative use of marriage and sexuality as a “remedy for concupiscence.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, the superiority of celibacy continued to be upheld as the ideal state of Christian perfection, which made marriage appear inferior and the lay person called to a lesser holiness.

What is noteworthy, however, is that since the early Church, the vocations to vowed chastity and marriage were both held as options for Christian men and women. It seems that it was precisely the sacramental vision of marriage which engendered celibacy and provided for it the spousal imagery. Celibate vocations, for their part, provided an eschatological reminder to the ultimate love and union for which every Christian was destined, so that married love could not be idolized or secularized, but informed by a Christological *caritas* and directed towards eternal life.

The understanding of marriage as a sacrament became increasingly Christocentric, related as it was to Christ’s presence at the wedding at Cana, the teaching of Aquinas that the efficacy and grace of the sacraments came from the passion of Christ, and St. Paul’s spousal imagery in Ephesians 5 regarding Christ’s love for and union with the Church. Christine Peters extensively treats the sacramental vision of marriage in late medieval and early modern England basing her

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<sup>36</sup> Teresa Olsen Pierre, “Marriage, Body, and Sacrament in the Age of Hugh of St Victor,” in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glenn W. Olsen (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2001), 240.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

analysis on the sermons of John Mirk, other medieval writings, and artistic representations of the sacraments in English churches. She notes how stained glass and wall paintings of the time period increasingly depicted “Christ, either on the Cross or as the Man of Sorrows, with channels of blood flowing from the five wounds and linking them to portrayals of the sacraments.”<sup>38</sup>

These representations had a didactic function as well as being expressions of devotion, and gave the sacrament of marriage a greater weight in the mind of the laity as a means of grace procured for humankind through Christ’s suffering. According to Peters’ research, there was a concurrent surge in devotion to the Passion of Christ, which was encouraged as a means for contemplation and an inspiration to a life of virtue and good works. The idea that human conduct was linked to the Paschal mystery, that sin inflicted wounds on the body of Christ, while living virtuously was a participation in redemption, gave an emotive and Christocentric meaning to preacher’s admonitions to “live well in marriage.” As Peters’ points out, the main duties of living marriage well in the Catholic sacramental view were fidelity to its indissoluble character, and fulfilling the duties of love, support, obedience and fidelity.<sup>39</sup>

It was in the associated and tacit rejection of the emotive link with the suffering Christ that the Reformation changes probably had the greatest impact. This removal of marriage from a Christocentric context was also more significant than any change from a Catholic idea of marriage as a ‘holy sacrament’ to a Reformation view as ‘primarily a civil contract.’<sup>40</sup>

## **Reformation Conflict over Marriage and Monasticism**

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<sup>38</sup> Christine Peters, “The Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,” *Past and Present* no. 169 (2000): 74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/651264>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

The sacraments and the concomitant “sacramental vision” of realities were at the heart of the reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While Catholics maintained the long-standing belief in seven sacraments which transmit grace, the Protestant reformers denied the efficacy of the sacraments, aside from baptism, basing salvation on faith alone. Apart from the Eucharist, one of the fiercest sacramental debates of the Reformation and early modern period was the treatment of marriage, theologically, politically, and socially.

For the Protestant reformers, dealing with the sacramental status of marriage was complex both in doctrine and practice. One desired end was to remove marriage from the jurisdiction of the Church and place it under the jurisdiction of the secular power. However, while denying marriage as a sacrament, the reformers had to find a way to maintain that it was still a “holy institution.” Luther tried to achieve this by setting up a model of marriage as a “social estate” alongside the church and the state. In extensive studies of marriage practice over the span of centuries, John Witte shows how Luther’s marriage model fitted into his larger theological schema:

In the context of [Luther’s] two kingdom’s theory, to place marriage and the family in the natural order of creation was to deny it a place in the spiritual order of redemption.

According to Lutheran lore, God has ordained two kingdoms in which humanity is destined to live: the earthly, or political, kingdom and the heavenly, or spiritual, kingdom. The earthly kingdom is the realm of creation, of natural and civic life, where a person operates primarily by reason, law, and passion. The heavenly kingdom is the realm of redemption, of spiritual and eternal life, where a person operates primarily by faith, hope, and charity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 51.

Marriage belonging wholly to the secular or “earthly kingdom” in no wise disconnected it from God’s law; rather, God’s law concerning marriage was mediated through the temporal rulers and courts, rather than through church authority. According to Luther, marriage was not a sacrament and therefore did not communicate grace or aid in redemption. It was a sacred duty towards God and society, since it was a remedy for lust and sexual sin, a state wherein people learn “virtues of love, patience, cooperation, and altruism”<sup>42</sup> and a social unit that formed the cornerstone of a well-ordered society.

Calvin went to great pains to remove any sacramental vestige from the marriage ceremony. He developed a wedding liturgy in which “the natural qualities and duties of marriage were emphasized more than the spiritual”<sup>43</sup> and anything reminiscent of sacramental sign including the minister’s gestures, the couple kneeling at the altar, the Eucharistic context, and liturgical music, was carefully eliminated. Even “much of the biblical exhortation, oaths, and final prayer were focused on the natural qualities of marriage: its origins in creation, the mandate of fleshly union, the need for mutual bodily sacrifice, the command of continence, the analogy of the body as the temple of God, the need for bodily purity. Not even the familiar analogies between marriage and the covenant between Yahweh and His elect or Christ and His Church were referenced.”<sup>44</sup>

If losing its sacramental privilege might have left of a gap in marriage spirituality, it was quickly filled by an attractive idealization of marital love. Here the English preachers and divines stand out for their proliferation of the humanist celebration of love inserted into the context of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>43</sup> John Witte, Jr., “Marriage Contracts, Liturgies, and Properties in Reformation Geneva,” in *To Have and To Hold: Marriage and Its Documentation in Western Christendom, 400-1600*, ed. Phillip L. Reynolds and John Witte, Jr. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 462.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



marriage. If marriage belonged merely to the “earthly kingdom,” it was still capable of making life on earth a sort of paradise through a love that is at once emotional, spiritual, and erotic. This idolization of married love based on sentiment placed marriage, and a woman’s role within marriage, under a great deal of pressure and expectation. Marriage manuals, such as Thomas Becon’s 1560 *The Book of Matrimonie*, proliferated and grew in popularity with their advice to married couples and particular instruction to women. This idolization was exactly what the Church fathers had sought to avoid, in directing marriage towards the Christological *caritas* and desire for eternal life reflected in a special way by vowed chastity.

The Protestants rejected vehemently any form of life that involved a vow of virginity or chastity and took measures to discredit and eradicate monastic life from society<sup>45</sup>. Luther claimed that celibacy was unnatural and not inspired by God, who in the book of Genesis, commanded marriage for all men and women, which the Church thwarted through “writings by some Roman Catholics extolling celibacy and deprecating marriage and sex.”<sup>46</sup> Luther also argued that the Church has no right to impose celibacy on clergy and religious, since this went beyond the dictates of scripture and natural law. Moreover, according to Luther’s pessimistic view of human nature, “the consciences of Christians and non-Christians alike are infused with lust, and a life of celibacy and monasticism only heightens the temptation” and “celibate...persons [are] thus driven by their sinful passion to incontinence and all manner of sexual deviance.”<sup>47</sup> In Luther’s mind, then, a celibate lifestyle, therefore, was by no means superior to marriage; in fact, it was far more likely an occasion of sin. The Protestant reformers

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<sup>45</sup> Also see Jo Ann McNamara “Sisters in Arms,” 419-420, for discussion on the various effects of Protestantism on female spirituality.

<sup>46</sup> John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 47.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

on the whole accepted this evaluation and condemnation of celibacy, and uniformly endorsed marriage of the clergy.

The “re-forming” of the Christian states of life in Protestant theology represented a departure from their development in Christian tradition. Even if the reformers intention was to maintain it as “godly,” marriage became increasingly secularized, viewed largely as a social institution for pleasant companionship and a well-ordered society and not as a sacramental bond of grace for the salvation of the partners. Moreover, denying its place in the New Testament Order of redemption and referring back to the Old Testament marriage models gave momentum to a patriarchal trend in marriage, away from the Christological vision which allotted spiritual equality to men and women. The rejection of celibate lifestyles occurred simultaneously with the stripping down of marriage, since vowed chastity required reference to the spousal union of Christ and the Church imaged in sacramental marriage. In addition, the loss of vowed chastity removed one external sign of “the life to come,” which promised the eternal love of God to which all human love is directed, exposing marriage to demands that it become the “earthly paradise” of love, affection, and pleasure. Certainly, Protestant preachers sought to weave many of the spiritual ideals of marriage back into their preaching and writing, but it remained incoherent or loosely connected at best, with the doctrinal foundations and actual structure they gave to Christian states of life.

It was this aspect of social order under male rule where women’s identity was especially implicated. As Patricia Crawford discusses, in Protestant doctrine, a woman’s natural and indeed, only, vocation was to become a wife and mother and the household was her proper sphere. Due to the Protestant suspicion of celibacy extended and disfavor towards the unmarried, “unmarried women were distanced from opportunities to express their spirituality after the monasteries were

closed.”<sup>48</sup> While Protestants certainly encouraged the spirituality of married woman, there was no avenue for women to develop an autonomous female community, if they so desired, or a feminine spirituality without reference to their relationship with men. Claire Walker claims that “although most women lacked the freedom to enact their desire for religious retirement, the idea of the convent as a female haven persisted, and it crossed confessional boundaries.”<sup>49</sup> After 1598, when the first English monastery opened on the Continent, this once again became an option for women who otherwise had “little choice beyond marriage and motherhood.”<sup>50</sup> She cites the example of two Protestant women who became Catholic against their fathers’ wishes, for the very purpose of entering religious life and to avoid marriage, to which they were adverse. She also mentions Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* with its suggestion of a type of Protestant convent.

The Catholic reforms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sought to maintain the traditional Christian states of life and the concomitant sacramental vision. In response to the attacks on the sacramental status of marriage, the Council of Trent (XXIV session, 1558) set about to do two things: reaffirm in the strongest possible language the sacramentality and Christo-centric character of marriage, and revise Canon law to simplify complicated sections and correct abuses in marriage praxis. Citing both Genesis and Christ’s teaching, the Council proclaimed “the bond of matrimony perpetual and indissoluble.”<sup>51</sup> Going further, the decree on marriage states “the grace which might perfect that natural love, and confirm that indissoluble union, and sanctify the married, Christ Himself, the institutor and perfecter of the venerable

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<sup>48</sup> Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

<sup>49</sup> Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 35.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Council of Trent: Session XXIV. *The Canons and Decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth, (London: Dolman, 1848), 193, Hanover Historical Texts Project. [www.hanover.edu/texts/trent](http://www.hanover.edu/texts/trent).

sacraments, merited for us by His passion.”<sup>52</sup> Without doubt, Trent also recognized the abuses and confusion caused by Canon law and implemented reforms similar to measures taken by the Protestants. It also emphatically reaffirmed the freedom of choice necessary to marriage and the conviction that “marriage is a holy thing, and is to be treated in a holy manner.”<sup>53</sup> The teachings and reforms of Trent were gradually transmitted to the faithful through the diocesan and parish channels, and implemented in parish programs and catechesis to educate the laity and bolster Catholic practice.

It would seem that such vitriolic criticism and near unanimous agreement on the uselessness and evils of celibacy would diminish Catholic confidence and enthusiasm for the vocation to religious life. To the contrary, Trent stubbornly reaffirmed its validity and that “it is better and more blessed to remain in virginity, or in celibacy.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, the years following Trent, and in some cases preceding it, saw innovation and flourishing of religious life in the Catholic Church, especially among women’s orders, both cloistered and active. Claire Walker suggests that the flourishing of English convents in France and the Lowlands was an out-growth from Catholic women’s active role as recusants in the Elizabethan era. Lay women in England organized household religion and Catholic rites, were patrons and protectors of priests, were involved in the affairs of the clergy, proselytized and cared for their neighbors in need. These women’s “determination to sustain and promote Catholicism for future generations” eventually flourished in the decision to “revive conventual life” where their daughters and granddaughters could become nuns.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., can. X

<sup>55</sup> Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 11.

As the development of Catholic and Protestant theology shows, the departure from the sacramental way of perceiving impacted the appraisal of marriage, vowed chastity, and female autonomy. The difference in understanding of life commitments and chastity was reflected by the particular marriage model and its counterpart or lack thereof. The Protestant model held female chastity primarily as remaining a virgin before marriage and faithful within marriage, which set feminine chastity in relation to the man who wished to marry a virgin and keep his wife to himself. Combined with strict Calvinist views of sexual morality, chastity could easily become merely a means of restraint and control. Catholic sacramental marriage was held “in the balance” with its counterpart: vocations of vowed chastity. Here chastity took on a broader meaning which could function as a force liberating a woman from under a man’s rule, from cares and concerns of a household, and freedom to pursue interests of spiritual and intellectual nature within a community of women. While chastity within the Protestant vision became absorbed within the sole vocation of marriage, chastity within the Catholic way of thinking was related to marriage as well as to a life dedicated to God. In a way, religious vocations signified the limit of men’s dominance over women. As long as there were women religious, there was a visible sign that women in general were not entirely subject, and had a spiritual equality and autonomy, a choice for a life that was outside of male control. This emphasized that there was a female value in and of itself, not only in relation to men.

### **Marriage and Chastity in Early Modern Drama**

The questions and debates surrounding marriage, chastity, and women’s roles were also discussed in early modern England through the proliferation of domestic dramas, marriage manuals, and the prevalence of these topics in the print culture. While these works were heavily

influenced by the Protestant perspective, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* explores these questions with perhaps one of the more sympathetic portrayals of vowed virginity.

Isabella, a novice with the Order of Clare, could be considered representative of the marriage-virginity debate of the Reformation in England. However, neither other characters in the play nor literary critics take her seriously on her own terms. What is incomprehensible or unacceptable about her for both the characters and critics is her choice for religious life. The three male characters who wield the most power over Isabella in the play (Angelo, Claudio, and the Duke) approach her choice with a mixture of admiration and incredulity, but ultimately urge her to abandon her purpose. In fact, the male character in the play who seems to best understand Isabella is, surprisingly, the bawdy Lucio. He is also the only one who saw her within her proper context, the monastic community of the Clares, which is perhaps the reason he grasped her identity better than the others.

For decades, if not centuries, much critical scholarship on *Measure for Measure* has obdurately labeled it a "problem play" and according to George Geckle, "it is Isabella who stands out...as *Measure for Measure*'s greatest critical 'problem.'"<sup>56</sup> In his 1971 article, Geckle proceeds to dissect the attitudes towards Isabella from Samuel Johnson (1765), through William Hazlitt (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1836) to his own contemporaries. It seems to be her firm commitment to her vow of chastity that is most irksome to these critics who call her "rigid," "harsh," "rancid," "pitiless," and "self-absorbed" and suggest that it would have been morally permissible, even imperative, for her to satisfy Angelo's lust to save her brother Claudio's life.

An attitude of greater sympathy towards Isabella and careful attention to her character is taken up again more recently by Barbara J. Baines. She argues that chastity is not a weakness or

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<sup>56</sup> George Geckle, "Shakespeare's Isabella," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22, no. 2, (Spring 1971): 163.

vice, but places Isabella in a position of power to negotiate in the world of men. While Baines' makes a much more thorough and much less dismissive analysis of chastity in the Renaissance, she also fails to insert it into the context of female religious life. She insists repeatedly that chastity is a secular concern, "a site and mode of secular power"<sup>57</sup> with only an illusory tie to religion. She claims that Isabella's choice is "social and psychological" and "grounded more firmly in the secular than in the religious."<sup>58</sup> Moreover, her criticism treats Isabella as an isolated individual, with only a few passing references to her community of sisters. By down-playing the role of religion and religious community, Baines still fails to "take Isabella seriously" and uncover her motivations and meaning.

Jessica Slights and Michael Morgan Holmes achieve a much more complete view of Isabella and her problematic chastity by discussing religious communities of early modern women. They disagree with criticism which places *Measure for Measure* within "a tradition of early modern anti-monasticism" and attempt a "sympathetic portrayal of Clarist life."<sup>59</sup> They argue that "Isabella's religious devotion actually allows her to resist pressures to marry" and that "life in an early modern convent could offer an intelligent woman like Isabella outlets for creative expression."<sup>60</sup> Despite the breadth of autonomy Slights and Holmes accord to Isabella, and the seriousness with which they approach an early modern woman's choice for religious life, when compared with early modern nuns' writing, they still fail to adequately interpret the motivations for such a choice. In the essay, their analysis of religious communities revolves around two main "attractions" of the convent. First, that the convent provided a space for women

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<sup>57</sup> Barbara Baines, "Assaying the Power of Chastity in *Measure for Measure*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 30, no. 2, (Spring 1990), 284.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Jessica Slights and Michael Morgan Holmes, "Isabella's Order: Religious Acts and Personal Desire in *Measure for Measure*," *Studies in Philology* 95, no. 3, (Summer 1998): 263-4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 265.

to undertake creative work such as composing music, painting, handicrafts, as well as studying and writing. Second, that the religious community fulfilled the “desire for strong affective bonds- including homoerotic ones- with other women.”<sup>61</sup> Despite a smattering of references to nuns being “brides of Christ,” they generally lack consideration of the sacramental interpretation of self and state of life present in early modern Catholicism. This does not correspond fully to what the writings of actual nun’s reveal about their motives, sense of identity, and choice for religious life, which I will develop later on in my discussion of convent texts written by English women.

### **Religious Women in Early Modern Print Culture**

That a nun’s motives were and are difficult to understand should perhaps not be surprising, given the propaganda efforts to obscure, blur, and re-write the image and identity of the nun in early modern England. These efforts began with the *Comperta Monastica*, a document written up after Cromwell’s commissioned investigation of English monasteries from 1535-1536. The document was thoroughly hostile and negative and “provided the ideological aperture Cromwell and Henry sought for the wholesale dissolution of the monasteries that they had been planning for some time.”<sup>62</sup> The accusations against the monasteries were never further investigated for validity, and a reluctant Parliament signed the Act of Dissolution in 1536, including a reference to the act being a command of the king rather than due process of law. Afterwards, anti-monastic preachers were sent out as “railers” against religious life, to disgrace the reputation of monks and nuns as ““hypocrites, sorcerers, and idle drones”” and stir up distrust and disgust among the laity.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>62</sup> Olga Valbuena, “Recusant Defenses,” Women Writers Online, <http://www.wwp.brown.edu>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



The campaign against religious women did not end after the dissolution of the monasteries. Throughout the seventeenth century, published works derided and mocked religious women as failures in chastity, suspect in their enclosures, and puerile in obedience, in general, not to be taken seriously.

While monks were at times depicted as threats to society, the mood in English print regarding women religious was one of mockery. Francis Dolan analyzes this phenomenon to show how most texts about nuns were meant “to provoke laughter at the nun’s failed attempts at chastity, her misguided obedience, her superstition, and her presumption to authority.”<sup>64</sup> Dolan agrees with the argument of Claire Walker and Kate Chedgoy that as actual nuns became less visible in English society, fictive nuns of literary imagination loomed large and “fed back into the perceptions of real nuns.”<sup>65</sup>

Nun’s chastity was the primary target, a not so subtle assault on the entire dual structure of sacramental marriage and vowed chastity and especially on monastic life with the autonomy it afforded women. These texts can also be read as an affront to all women, who, according to this mind, could not possibly be chaste unless married and kept under the careful watch of a husband. While nuns are “critiqued for keeping [their] vow of chastity as much as for breaking it,” actual celibacy was harder to imagine, harder to mock, and “the least titillating for the reader”<sup>66</sup> and so the critics chose to create an image of sensual, licentious nuns, concealed behind cloister walls. Dolan cites various works such as *Venus in the Cloister* and “A Letter to a Virtuous Lady to Disswade Her from Her Resolution of Being a Nun” as representative of this theme. *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugall*<sup>67</sup> by Thomas Robinson is another

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<sup>64</sup> Frances Dolan, “Why Are Nuns Funny?” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 4, (2007): 509.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Robinson, *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugall* (London, 1622), sig. C3.

“purported exposé” of religious immorality. He claims these English sisters, who had moved their Sion convent to Lisbon, live a life of pleasure and ease, entertaining themselves with bawdy songs and games, and having sexual relations with their confessors. On a more sinister note, he accuses them of eliminating “the consequences and proof of sexual transgression through abortion and infanticide”<sup>68</sup> supposedly sanctioned by the priests. His text also links nuns’ sexual exploits with exploitation: that they have sex not so much out of their own desire, but out of blind obedience to corrupt authority.

This leads to the second attack on religious women and any actual sense of self: that they have suspended their reason and judgment and are ready to obey blindly and obligingly, even in matters of sin. This image of nuns alludes to a larger criticism of Catholic obedience to ecclesial authority; the “nuns stand in for all Catholics, who are laughably stupid, superstitious, and easily led.”<sup>69</sup> The nuns are pictured as having no other purpose than “serving” men, though they “escaped” into the convent to avoid men, and so their purpose and intention is pathetically unfulfilled. This lack of agency and autonomy presents them as pitiable, ridiculous, and something no woman would want to be.

Another suspicious element of religious life was the enclosure. While men saw female enclosure (in the home, for example) as desirable in some degree to govern women’s movements, the cloister pushes the limit. Derision of the cloister walls casts them not as “reinforcements of chastity but barriers to surveillance”<sup>70</sup> so the nuns could entertain illicit relations unseen. Dolan also argues here that the convent stood for Catholic privacy, which was

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<sup>68</sup>Frances Dolan, “Why Are Nuns Funny?” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 4, (2007): 526.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

distrusted and suspected. Anything private or secret was under suspicion of being the “prurient private, imagined only so as to be breached and exposed.”<sup>71</sup>

This is but a brief sketch of the caricature of women religious in Early Modern print culture: an utterly senseless woman, a ridiculous failure in her chastity and servile and childish in obedience, a woman without autonomy or personality, whose intended purpose has been foiled. Dolan, however, asks, “What do nuns want?” and answers that “Most texts have no idea.”<sup>72</sup> To discover what an English woman would want, what she was doing, and why she would choose such a life (even with the risk of being identified with this publicly degraded caricature) requires examining the actual life, work, and writings of these women.

Given these conditions, it is remarkable that English women continued to enter religious life decades after the dissolution of the monasteries. They had few examples of women religious in their homeland and the social and familial odds were against such as choice. Nevertheless, new convents opened on the Continent specifically for English women wishing to become religious, reaching a peak in the 1620s.<sup>73</sup> This choice to become a religious shows a certain resilience against the tide of hostile opinion toward religious women, and so the motivation must have been something strong and persistent.

To this end, the character of Isabella and the literature cited by Dolan raise some interesting questions. What did nuns want? What was an English woman’s motivation and intention for joining a convent on the Continent? Who were these exiled English nuns and what sort of life did they lead? How did their sacramental religious perspective influence their desires, motives, and lifestyle?

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 525.

<sup>73</sup> Claire Walker, “Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 no. 2, (Summer 1999): 398.

### **Early Modern Religious Women in their own Words**

We can better understand and take seriously a nun's motives and experience by entering into the monastery, the sacred space of the community in which she lived. I propose to do this through a close reading of the obituary notices of the sisters in the Benedictine Monastery of the Immaculate Conception at Ghent.<sup>74</sup> The monastery at Ghent was founded in 1627 as an offshoot of the Benedictan house at Brussels, the first monastery established on the continent specifically for English women. The document, which spans the years 1627-1811, is "from an old manuscript, apparently from the seventeenth century, preserved at St. Mary's Abbey, Oulton"<sup>75</sup> and is divided into three parts. Part I, which is the concern of this paper, is entitled "Mortuary Notices from A.D. 1627 to 1659." This part presents 37 obituary notices from the foundation of the monastery to the death of its fourth abbess, Magdalen Digby. The purpose for the document is stated in the introduction which cites the monastery's Statutes which require the sisters to note down in a collection the lives and outstanding virtues of deceased sisters.<sup>76</sup> These notices would then be read aloud to the community on the anniversary of the sister's death. The notices are comprised of similar features and generic conventions. Each one begins with the sister's religious name and date of death. This is followed by a brief relation of her baptismal name, the names of her parents, and her place of origin. Sometimes further details or short vignettes are given about her family which reveal an acute awareness of the religious and political situation of England, and how this played a role in the woman's choice for monastic life. It is noted down if her parents were considered particularly virtuous or if they had suffered much for their faith, if

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<sup>74</sup> "Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627-1811." Contributed by the Lady Abbess and Community of St Mary's Benedictine Abbey, Oulton, Stone, Staffordshire. Who Were the Nuns? <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/wwtn>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 2.

she was raised by another relative, if her family or relatives were Protestant, and so on. The obituary notice then follows a pattern in relating the life of the sister: the circumstances of her calling and decision for religious life, the way she lived within religious life including offices held, notable virtues, particular sufferings or penances, mystical experiences, and finally the circumstances and scene of her death. The notices range from a few paragraphs to several pages in length, and are written in simple, direct prose.

While some may want to consider the document as purely conventional or hagiographical, I would like to suggest that it has value as both a historical document and literary text imbedded with particular meaning. The document was produced for internal use in the community where it remained for several centuries after it was produced. It was not intended as propaganda, nor a defense of the nuns' way of life, nor for the edification of a wider Catholic readership. There is careful attention to dates, precise names, and reference to historical events, and some of the recorded sayings or actions come from the sister's personal papers which were examined after her death. Each notice is a small biography, and while they follow a generic pattern, there is a substantial amount of variation and distinctive anecdotes about each sister. The author may refer to their lives as "angelicall" but makes no effort to hide the faults, struggles, and very human matters of illness, suffering, and death. The supernatural is presented in a sparing and discreet way, without the penchant for the fantastic or the legendary character typical of medieval hagiography. Finally, the document is advantageous for answering the questions I proposed since it is the report of the nuns about themselves and reflects how they identify themselves within the larger context of their religious perspective and the historical situation of England at the time. It is, therefore, a useful tool to resolve the question "What do nuns want?"

as well as offer insight into the way the sacramental habit of thought informed their autonomy, spirituality, and sense of self.

Apart from relating the life of each sister, the manuscript shows a deep concern with England. Although cloistered, the sisters received news from the outside world, and in particular from England through visitors and family members. The sister's evidently worried for their families, especially those who were forced to move from place to place, or experienced threats or impoverishment due to religious conflict. They felt strain and poverty in their monastery due to their families and benefactors financial losses since nearly all of their support came from England.<sup>77</sup> The manuscript even gives hints at the sister's political allegiances: at one point, a family takes refuge in Ghent, fleeing from "those Great and Generall Broyls which Crumwell the cruell tyrant and usurper had made in England and Ireland."<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, shortly after the beheading of his father, Charles II stopped at the monastery in Ghent in March 1650 and is received by the sisters, having a private conversation with then Abbess Mary Rooper. The sisters note afterwards that they were moved "to pray hartily for his Conversion"<sup>79</sup> and at very least, if he were restored to the throne that, he would show more clemency towards English Catholics. If in the first few decades the sisters were keenly aware of the situation in England, through the mid to late 1650s they actually took an active part in the Royalist efforts to restore the monarchy. Claire Walker offers a fascinating study of the involvement of the fifth abbess of the Ghent monastery, Mary Knatchbull, in the Restoration cause. She communicated frequently with some of the king's closest advisors and through "control of royalist mail, transmission of news from

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<sup>77</sup> For further discussion on the English monasteries struggle for survival in the face of Catholic financial decline, see Claire Walker, "Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no.2, (Summer 1999): 397-418.

<sup>78</sup> "Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627-1811," 53.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

England, regular advice to Hyde [advisor to Charles II], and funding of the king's cause"<sup>80</sup> through soliciting loans and gifts from contacts in France and Belgium. These attitudes and activities of the Ghent monastery show a profound connection to the concerns of England and the adjustments, responses, and active involvement the nuns made in relation to their homeland. It does not seem, then, that a motive for their religious exile was escapism, or flight from the troubles of England, since emotional and practical attachment persisted.

While the sisters did not or could not ignore or forget their homeland, there is also little to suggest that they joined the monastery to take part in political conspiracy. We return then, to the question, "What did nuns want?" In attempting to answer the question, I plan to analyze the obituary notices according to several themes: 1) Choice for Religious Life: What moved women to choose the monastic life? 2) The Ideal Religious Woman: What qualities and virtues did the sisters admire and therefore note down? 3) Union with Christ: How did the sisters understand their relationship with God? What sort of spiritual or mystical experiences did they record? 4) The "Art of Dying and Living Well": How did the sister's view death? In particular, what do the metaphors they use to describe the sisters' deaths reveal about their sense of self?

### 1. Choice for Religious Life

While Slights and Holmes offer considerations of creative work and feminine affection as reasons why a woman would choose religious life, this does not seem to be reflected in the obituaries of the sisters in the Benedictine Abbey of the Immaculate Conception at Ghent. In fact, none of the short biographies give reasons such as these for a woman's entrance. More

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<sup>80</sup> Claire Walker, "Prayer, Patronage, and Political Conspiracy: English Nuns and the Restoration," *The Historical Journal* 43, no.1, (March 2000): 2-3.

common by far, seems to be an attraction to a life of prayer and penance and an underlying desire “to unite her self wholly to God by means of so Divine an exercise.”<sup>81</sup>

In fact, a recurring motif is the sense of a divine initiative. Rather than being something they chose, the women themselves had a sense of being chosen or called. Phrases such as “God called her to Religion” recur and give the impression that the sisters considered their choice as a response. Even in this there was variation. Sometimes this predilection was welcomed by the young woman or widow who entered the convent with an “earnest thirst of consecrating herself to God in the state of virginity & through a Generous renuntiation of all things for God.”<sup>82</sup> Other times, distinctly noted by the writer of the obituary, the call was resisted.

The founding Abbess, Lucy (Elizabeth) Knatchbull<sup>83</sup>, for example, did not see entrance into the monastery as a way to advance herself, and the author relates that when “she found the strong inspires of Almighty God calling her to Religion, yet loath to forgoe her Liberty or loose pretended hopes of advancements which she had an ambition to pursue, [she] shut the ears of her soul against the voice of Almighty God.”<sup>84</sup> In Knatchbull’s personal writings, the author of the obituary reports finding this explanation of her inner struggle: “Between the Desires my soul had to embrace the Divine Vocation and the extream repugnance since found in it, my heart (as it were) was torn to pieces” and yet after three years in this state of anguish, she “made her Resolution and broke those Chains which had so fettered her affections.”<sup>85</sup> Even while a novice, she was “seaz’d upon with an Extream sadness” until she had an interior experience of God

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<sup>81</sup> “Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627-1811,” 36.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>83</sup> The sisters commonly took new religious names when they made their profession of vows. The obituary notices record each woman’s previous name, sometimes including the names of parents and other relatives. For the benefit of others who may be researching specific individuals included here, I have chosen to place the baptismal name in parentheses after the religious name; for those who were widows, I have included both the baptismal name and maiden surname in parentheses.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



which left her with “affections of ardent love towards him.” The experience seems to be a type of vision which occurred “after holy communion” when she was still a novice. She “saw with the eyes of her soul a most Glorious and Supernatural star distant as far as heaven, and it alone seem’d to enlighten the whole world. This Vision struck her into a great apprehension of the Greatness and Majesty of Almighty God yet left in her soul an abundant Comfort.”<sup>86</sup> The sisters give no explanation or interpretation of the experience, but signal its effects and the subsequent contributions Knatchbull made to the community as its founding Abbess; she was a much loved mother superior to the 30 sisters who entered the monastery under her leadership.

A similar case of resistance to the divine calling, was Alexia (Margerit) Gray, a young woman whose aunt “took her and bred her in a high rank according to the Gallantry of this world.”<sup>87</sup> Described as lively, intelligent, and attractive, Alexia (though remaining a devout Catholic) was “earnestly pursuing her pleasures in all kind of Recreation, Balls, masks and the Like” until she had a dream in which she witnessed her own final judgment. This dream inspired her to make a general confession, yet she continued her courtly lifestyle as before until the moment of her “calling” which evidently occurred at one of the balls she frequented. The nun-author sketches the vignette as follows:

At last, Almighty God, out of his infinite mercy whilst she was actually dancing, even in one of the turns of the same dance, turn’d her hart wholly towards him, calling her efficaciously to religion, making no Delay, having her former vision...[in] memory...she presently prepared for her journey and came to Ghent.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 26.

This sketch reveals another aspect of the nuns' habitual way of seeing and interpreting that reappears in other matters which I will discuss later. This "way of seeing" their lives and experiences was a particular blending of the natural and supernatural, the material with the immaterial, the bodily with the spiritual. In accordance with the sacramental vision of realities, the nuns repeatedly "read" physical things as infused with and manifesting spiritual meaning. Therefore, even a secular activity such as dancing could be an occasion for God to "turn the heart" towards him and make his divine overture. We will see this way of seeing recur in other matters such as daily life, the body, visions, illness, and death.

While Lucy and Alexia represent one "type" of woman embarking upon religious life on the Continent, that is, a young, educated Catholic woman from the upper classes who struggled to accept the renunciations religious life implied, they are by no means the standard or norm for who became a nun. The document cites a number of diverse circumstances in which each woman perceived a call and made her choice. Some faced struggles not from an interior resistance, but from external vicissitudes such as lack of the required dower, ignorance of the English language (as in the case of a woman from Flanders), and even the devil himself tempting them away from their call<sup>89</sup>. The most common, however, were various forms of opposition from family members. One sister, for example, had an aunt who belonged to the Carmelite order and who pressured her niece to join her at her convent in Antwerp. On a visit to this aunt, the girl felt she was certainly meant to be a Benedictine. This decision caused friction with her relatives and "though she confessed the strife between nature and grace did even in a manner split her hart in

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<sup>89</sup> Mary Trevillion fell sick prior to entering the monastery. The author reports that "she saw the Enemy come to their bed side in shape of a Doctor of Phisick." He tried to convince her that religious life was much too harsh for her, "being so Delicate tenderly bread and weak of body." She resisted his counsel, and when he turned away in anger, she "at that very instant plainly saw his ugly Club foot" (17). This same sister seems to have been visited on other occasions by the devil who "always had a spite against her in life" and "appear'd at her beds feat like a munkie" as she lay dying. The author writes proudly that she "took a Crucifix and defi'd [him]" (18) and at last conquered his influence over her.

pieces for she was assailed with Batterys which might have shaken a masculine spirit, yet the obedience to God Almighty's inspirations made her break through all."<sup>90</sup>

Several of the sisters were Protestant or "hereticks" of varying degrees,<sup>91</sup> and their obituaries relate the story of conversion to the Catholic faith along with their religious calling. This, of course, was often accompanied by extreme opposition from family members, one of the most notable being that of Sister Ceclie (Jane) Price. She was her uncle's heir and raised in his house as a Protestant, but "was reconcil'd and made Catholick" in secret. When she would no longer go to Protestant services, her uncle perceived her conversion and "his Love turned to rigorous severity, persecuting her to Extreimity, casting her into the common Goal at London, in the very Dungeon, amongst the rascall crew."<sup>92</sup> It is unclear how long she remained in jail; the author reports that "she was almost sterv'd and eaten up with vermine" before her case came to the attention of a Catholic noblewoman, who negotiated her release and made sure she was cared for and restored to health. Another sister is described, not as a Protestant, but as having "remain'd a kind of schismatick, frequenting heretick churches" in her youth, before her conversion. Yet another was married to a Protestant knight, "a Debayst man" who was repugnant to her from the beginning and from whom she fled after the death of her parents. On a visit to the Benedictine convent prior to her conversion, she was "taken with [the nuns] pious conversation" and fell "in Love with their angelicall state"<sup>93</sup> yet had to wait until her husband died (when she was 53 years old), before she could join the community.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>91</sup> Alexandra Walsham, Michael Questier, and Peter Lake have done extensive research on the various degrees of Catholic adherence and practice at the time, making distinctions between recusants, church papists, occasional conformists, etc. For more on this topic see Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England*, (London; Woodbridge; Rochester, N.Y., 1993.) Also see *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560-1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier (Woodbridge, 2000), 211-36.

<sup>92</sup> "Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627-1811," 32.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 48.

This introduces us to another variation in the lives of the sisters: those who were widows. Of the 37 obituaries, four women are explicitly referred to as widows, and some details of their secular lives are recorded. Mary Ignatia Coninsby (Margarit Corham), for example, “did a world of good deeds...relieving the poor, helping distress’d Catholicks, visiting and Comforting prisoners, Succord orphans and widows, prefer’d servants to higher promotion, harbour’d priests, and many Such Charity’s.”<sup>94</sup> Perhaps of most interest is “good old sister Benedicta” Corby (Isabella Richardson). She and her husband, Gerard Corby, were “both good and sound catholicks and had constantly suffer’d Great many persecutions for the faith of Christ, expell’d and forced from place to place.”<sup>95</sup> They finally settled on the Continent where they had 4 sons and 2 daughters, all of whom entered religious life as Jesuit priests and Benedictine nuns. One son became a Jesuit missionary and “labour’d so faithfully in Christ’s vineyard of England, that by publick Injustice he suffer’d a Glorious martyrdom att London.”<sup>96</sup> At the age of 80, Isabella entered the monastery at Ghent, where she lived for another 20 years. Referring to her funeral, the author of the obituary remarks with pride and admiration:

Looking after she was dead with such a wise Countenance & majesty that an English Gentleman who seen her Course askt what noble Countess or Lady that was; and he might have been told she was greater than a Lady being the Spouse of Christ & mother of a martyr, thoug in the world she was wife to an honest yeoman.<sup>97</sup>

On the other end of the age spectrum, some were sent to the convent by their parents as children, as young as 11 years, to be educated by the sisters in a type of “school” which they

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 64-5.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

termed the “convict.” The girls were designated as “convictrices” and the text alludes to a group of these girls (requiring a sister to be placed in charge of them) who were educated in the convent and then returned to England, married, and took up lay life. Some, however, wanted to remain as sisters, and among these, three “innocent sweet little virgin[s]”<sup>98</sup> died before they reached the required age of 16, making vows on their deathbeds and being buried in the religious habit.

While the “supernatural” reasons for becoming a religious may appear opaque to a modern reader, and while it may be tempting to read their choice as a proto-feminist subversion of patriarchy or form of political-religious resistance, the evidence offered by the obituaries points much more to spiritual considerations. Not that communities of religious women did not function in society as a form of tacit insistence on female autonomy or resistance to religious change or political turmoil. They very well may have been inserted among these concerns without this being the primary reason for a woman to choose such a state in life. The sisters do not appear to have joined the monastery to develop their creative or intellectual talents, nor to avoid marriage and family responsibilities, nor to enjoy female companionship, though these things certainly were part of their lives. Rather, the overwhelming element in their choice is an interior desire awakened by an interior call which they identified as coming from God as a call to religious life. Whatever the reader makes of this divine calling, if we are to understand the sisters in their own terms, we cannot ignore this integral piece of their vision: how they understood themselves and what they were about. In fact, the sisters themselves were aware that their choice and their reasons, their entire lifestyle, could be disconcerting and obscure to their own contemporaries. To this effect, Alexia Gray is reported to have said the following on her death bed:

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 34.

O how do I bless God for this happiness, of being a Child of our holy fathers amongst you; in this world none can Dive into the infinity (in a manner) of benefits included in so holy a vocation, unless illuminated by almighty God, and so neer the Confines of eternity.<sup>99</sup>

At the same time, this happiness and “infinity of benefits” that Sister Alexia refers to involved natural life as well as the supernatural. Within the religious community, a variety of gifts, talents, and relationships flourished. The sisters were concerned with the “art of Dying and Living wel” (27) which concerned not only their relationship with God and their eternal destiny, but also the daily work and relationships among each other. As we continue to broaden out an understanding of a religious woman, we need to place her within a community. The seventeenth century nun makes no sense abstracted from her monastery, nor can she be fully understood as an isolated individual, since she simply did not live that way.

## 2. The Religious Community and the “Ideal” Religious Woman

While the obituary notices do not set out to describe the daily life of the monastery, we can glean details about the daily life and relationships of the sisters. Furthermore, an observation about the purpose and intended audience for the text gives us some insight into how the sisters sought to make their monastery “a little paradise.” The obituary notices were read aloud to the whole community on the anniversary of the sister’s death for the edification of the nuns and for the remembrance to pray for the soul of the deceased. Furthermore, according to the Catholic doctrine of the “communion of saints,” the living sisters remained connected or “in communion” with their deceased sisters. If the deceased was already in heaven, the living sisters could ask her

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 27.

to intercede for them before God for special requests or struggles. The obituaries, therefore, contain mostly positive accounts of the sisters' lives and qualities, though from time to time they also mention a choleric temper, a spoiled childhood, or other such defects. Aside from giving honor to the dead, these accounts of virtue would inspire the living sisters to admiration and imitation, thus perpetuating the good order and holy atmosphere of the monastery. Discovering the qualities and virtues highlighted by the author shows us what they valued, what made the community peaceful and happy, and what qualities the "ideal religious woman" possessed. What is interesting here is that the theme of the "ideal woman" is taken up elsewhere – for example, in conduct manuals or the Protestant marriage manuals. While these are written by men – and therefore perhaps not wholly devoid of misunderstanding of women or wishful thinking – the obituaries of the nuns were written by another religious woman. Our question of "what do nuns want" now extends to their lifetime in the monastery: How did they want to be? How did they want the others around them to be?

The first impression the text gives is that the monastery was a well ordered place. There was an Abbess who was mother superior and the authority in the monastery, and she was assisted by a Prioress. The sisters were divided according to stages of religious life: the first year called the "trial of religion" in which the woman was considered a "scholar" who was trying out the religious life for a year. This was followed by the novitiate. Each of these groups was governed by a sister called a "mistress," as in the "mistress of novices." There was, of course, the group of young girls who were educated in the "convict" within the monastery and were called "convictresses." This group also had a sister assigned in charge of them. The professed religious sisters were divided into two groups: the choir sisters whose main duty was to pray and recite the Divine Office; and the extern (or lay) sisters who undertook manual labor and service for the

monastery, as well as duties that would send them on errands out of the monastery. Each sister, both choir and extern, held an “office” which was a responsibility that changed from time to time and could be held for years. In the obituaries, the various offices a sister held throughout her life were named, such as “cellarer”, “sacristan,” or “infirmarian” to name a few.

More important to the author was the way in which a sister carried out her duties and her daily life in the community. Each obituary contains a phrase such as “her most notable virtues were many but chiefly...”<sup>100</sup> followed by a list of qualities such as charity, zeal, gentleness, obedience, and so on. After this, several anecdotes from the sister’s life are related that illustrate the virtues listed. The virtues are naturally those needed for life in a cloistered community which observes a particular rule of life, in this case, the Rule of St Benedict. The women lived in close quarters and never left their monastery. This made qualities such as “silence and recollection” and the admiration of sisters who “never spoak an idel word”<sup>101</sup> meaningful on several levels. Primarily, in relation to their spiritual aims, silence implied the sister was striving for conversation with God in her spirit and listening to his inspirations. On the natural level, it created “space” in which the sisters could work and move through their enclosed monastery with some form of privacy and peace, not constantly distracted by questions, conversations, or gossip that would demand their attention. Another virtue that seems highly prized is humility and reference to St Benedict’s “twelve stages of humility” which the author cites here and there when relating an occasion of humility shown by the sister. Charity, especially towards the sick, sweetness of temperament, and amiability in conversation are also frequently highlighted. Once again, these virtues would have a direct impact upon the peace and happiness of the entire

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 23.



community and hence the admiration, appreciation, and desire to perpetuate this “ideal” figure of the religious woman.

In addition to moral qualities or virtues, the nuns also admired the natural gifts such as a strong, sweet choir voice, musical talent, or an artistic ability working with silk, or gold and silver. They also comment on the intelligence, wit, and prudence of certain sisters who were said to have “good witt and a prudent, mature Judgement.” They admired those who spoke Latin or French, who were “good with their pen,” who could write or translate, or were well versed in theology or spirituality. Sister Mary Pease, for example, was noted to be “singularly Devouted to Great St Augustine, much vers’d and devoted to his works, having upon all occasions som of his amorous sentences at hand, which she interlaced in her discourse.”<sup>102</sup>

The author also frequently includes brief descriptions of the physical appearance of the sister, and often it is admiring. There are repeated references to “a complexion pure fair,” a “straight timbered” body, or being “accounted extraordinary handsome.”<sup>103</sup> Sister Margarit, for example, is described as “having a Lovely pretty countenance, her complexion and features suitable.”<sup>104</sup> There are also references to the women turning heads outside the monastery before they joined. Teresia Gardiner was “rarely qualified and Deservedly accounted the prime beauty of England; this drew the eyes of Great ones upon her.”<sup>105</sup> In fact, the obituaries give the impression that the monastery had succeeded in acquiring the most beautiful women in England.

Some scholars might read this as indicative of an implicit or explicit sexual desire of the nuns for each other. This view seems to conflate an admiration of beauty and desire for sexual pleasure, which are not necessarily the same thing. I would suggest that this attention to physical

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 48.

beauty needs to be read according to the hermeneutic of seeing that we discussed above: the sacramental vision of realities, including the body. (This will appear again with the sisters' attitude towards the body suffering in illness and death.) If, for the nuns, physical realities express and manifest spiritual realities, then their descriptions of physical beauty could suggest two things. First, that several or many of the nuns were indeed physically beautiful, which the author highlights to further draw attention to their interior, spiritual beauty of which the external was a sign. Second, that the nuns were actually quite ordinary in appearance, but the sisters' gaze (which was informed by perceiving spiritual beauty and meaning in the physical) influenced, enhanced, and even transformed the physical appearance and it was this vision that was recorded.

Several descriptions from the text lend support to this suggestion of a sacramental vision of beauty. Tecla (Phillip) Bedingfield is described as having "a pure sanguine complexion, very straight and proper personage, lovely in corporall features." The author immediately goes on to matters "concerning that which is much more prisable." These more important aspects were "a rare interiour temper", "a Gracious sweet and most meek disposition" and "Great courage in suffering."<sup>106</sup> The author also gives a fairly graphic example of this courage in suffering when Sister Tecla had a knee injury requiring a surgeon. The beauty of the body and the suffering body are united in considerations of virtue. Moreover, her interior and exterior beauty were put to the service of others; the author recalls seeing Sister Tecla in the infirmary "recreating the sick with such innocent and pleasant conversation, that is was an excellent devertisement to see her mid mirth and piety."<sup>107</sup> Another example is that of Mother Eugenia (Jane) Poulton, the second of the four beloved abbesses. The author relates that "she was a most Lovely handsome Lady" and once again immediately unites this to her spirit: "Besides the beauty of her interiour Devotion, she was

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

graced with an angelicall Countenance, att all times but especially in prayer.”<sup>108</sup> Prayer, according to this observation, a place and time where grace was infused into the sister’s soul, was also something that made the physical features appear more beautiful, perhaps inspiring other sisters to prayer and devotion as well. The third abbess, Mary Rooper also possessed a power in her combined physical and spiritual beauty. The author claims that “there appeared in her Countenance and garbe both a majesty and modesty: many Hereticks by the hearing and seeing her were Converted to the orthodoxall faith.”<sup>109</sup> The sisters evidently interpreted feminine beauty (even when clothed in habit and veil) as something that could move others to goodness and grace, rather than feeling that their beauty was little more than a trap or temptation for men. For the sisters themselves, the same Mother Mary Rooper was an inspiration to turn towards God: “In a word she was a dayly light that did shine through the whole monastery, exciting us thereby to Glorify our heavenly father.”<sup>110</sup>

The “ideal” of the religious woman encompassed both the natural and supernatural: the spiritual life, the moral virtues and character, the natural qualities of intelligence, art, music, and the physical appearance which communicated the interior. These various aspects were fused together in such a way that it is nearly impossible to segregate one as the “reason” for nuns being nuns. In fact, to say, “women went to convents to develop their intellectual gifts” would be a very partial view of what occurred in convents and how the nun’s themselves evaluated and presented their vocation. While this certainly may have been true in individual cases, the complexity of the convent life (the life of sacrifice, work, prayer, etc) would make it difficult to maintain such an intention for very long. Uniting this ideal with the previous discussion on the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 45.

divine call, we can gather that a nun wanted to develop her entire personality and gifts in service of God, and according to the obituaries, this was both encouraged and admired.

### 3. Union with Christ

The ideal of a religious woman extended further than her interactions with her sisters to encompass her relationship with the one who “honnour’d her so very much as to call her to so sublime a state.”<sup>111</sup> Each nun’s personal spirituality and way of relating to God seems to be a matter treated with delicacy by the authors of the obituaries, since they may have had more or less, and certainly partial, information about the sister’s interior experiences and contemplation. The author seeks to respectfully present some details – whether from things the sister related while alive or observations of her external comportment – that reveal this hidden, intimate spiritual life. Mary Knatchbull, the first sister of the Ghent monastery to die, was remembered as “a Lover and practice of Silence” with “an Extraordinary aptness to mental prayer” and “God was pleas’d to lead her unto him by the way of sweetness.”<sup>112</sup> Apart from observing her external conduct, the author relies on the testimony of others about her: “She gave herself much to interior recollection, Retaining the presence of God so constantly, that as She confess’d herself to those that had authority to Examine her she never lost it from her profession to her Death.”<sup>113</sup>

In the case of the first abbess, Lucy Knatchbull, the material for describing her spiritual experiences was more abundant, since the confessor of the convent had evidently instructed her to share them with the other sisters and also to write them down in her personal papers. Her relationship with God is described in terms of intimacy, her “heart being tendred in affections of

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

ardent love towards him.”<sup>114</sup> At least a half dozen visions or contemplations are recorded, and the author notes that “most of her feavours [occurred] after holy Communion, at Mass, or in the Presents of the Blessed Sacrament”<sup>115</sup> giving a Eucharistic context to her spiritual life. At one point, on the feast of Corpus Christi, “before the blessed sacrament she saw our Saviour as at the age of 12 years, in strength reaching out his right hand, who gave her his benediction.”<sup>116</sup> Another time, while contemplating the suffering and scourged figure of Christ, “she had the feavour to refresh her amorous heart and soul, by reposing her head upon her Dear Redeemers Left side.”<sup>117</sup> Other experiences were less filled with imagery, with more emphasis on feeling and desire. She felt, at one point, “deeply struck in Love...[with] a continual Excess of Languishing, her soul thirsting and pining away after her spouse.”<sup>118</sup> The author summarizes these and other experiences as the culmination of religious life since “by adhearing to Our Lord [she] became one spirit with him.”<sup>119</sup> These divine favors were not seen as privileging the abbess, but to bring “much fruit to the edification and example of every one.”<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the obituary includes a passage from Lucy’s own writings in which she relates her union with God to the better service of the community: “I will often remember that all they of this community are God’s dear Children; and that I being his poor servant, ought to be very Carefull of them, and to proceed with much love towards them.”<sup>121</sup>

The mention of mystical union occurs with other sisters, if less boldly. Mother Eugenia (Jane) Pouton was another abbess whose interior life was suspected to be one of intense love for God, though the author has less evidence to present. After noting many signs of virtues that

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 9.

suggest a deep spiritual life, she writes: “Tis certain that my Lady Eugenia had supernaturall prayer for she has been at these times for a quarter of an hour together alienated from her senses” and also notes “a particular feavour concerning our holy Mother St Scholastica’s appearing to her.”<sup>122</sup> Sister Bridgitt Gildrige (Dorothy Dorvolie), a widow, was also remembered for “attending much to prayer & union with Almighty God who Liberally rewarded her with present payment for she had always a tender and sincible experience how sweet God is.”<sup>123</sup> Catherine (Elizabeth) Wigmore was seen caught up in stillness before receiving communion “so that some who observed her believes verily that she neither heard saw, nor minded any thing that was done save only, interiourly how to enjoy and entertain her beloved.” The author adds that “there are some in this house will affirm, she had many supernaturall feavours which upon the bond of secrecy they beg to be excus’d and will not revail them.”<sup>124</sup>

If mystical union with Christ was the highest goal religious and spiritual endeavor, particular sisters also had visions or dreams that pertained to more mundane concerns, showing again the fusion of the natural and supernatural in their lives. Two cases in particular demonstrate this. Sister Mary Digby evidently tended to fall asleep in prayer, especially matins which was prayed at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning. This caused her great frustration and on one special feast, she prayed fervently to be freed from the malady. While in the choir during matins, she was fighting off sleep and just about to ask permission to go back to bed, yet still trying to keep her resolution.

And as she cast her eyes up to the blessed virgin’s Image to renew this intention, she beheld a bright star which increased by Degrees very much, both in splendour and bigness appearing very Glorious upon the image. When instantly from the same Image an internall voice speake

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 60.

to her in these kind of words: As you see the Greatness and resplendent brightness of this star's increase so Did you increase and augment thy Glory, every time you resisted sleep in my honnour and for my sake.<sup>125</sup>

This vision seems to have cured her of her sleepiness, and the obituary counts it an “effectual grace” that made her life easier and more exact with the rule.

Teresia (Chatherine) Matlock was reported to have a skill with silk work and came up with a way to exercise her creativity and gain income for the monastery through a dream she reported. During the day she had been walking in the garden admiring the flowers and leaves, and wishing she could somehow imitate them in silk.

The very next night it Seem'd to her in Sleep, that she found herself in a garden full of all sorts of Curious plants & flowers, beholding likewise there a Comly venerable and gracious old man; And she presently understood it was hr Great patron St Augustine he, addressing towards her, told her that to fulfill her earnest wish and Desire, he would teach her how to Imprint those leaves in Silk work, Instantly Drecting her in all perticulars.<sup>126</sup>

Sister Teresia taught her fellow sisters the skill, which, the author relates, was still in practice in the monastery after her death. In fact, this particular craft seems to have been important at that time, since the sisters were “tasting the effects of persecuted Chatholicks in England in the withdrawing and loss of temporall means.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 40. Claire Walker analyzes this same anecdote in a different way in her discussion on how monasteries of English women managed to support themselves economically when resources coming from England were scarce. See “Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters.”

Whether or not an individual sister received such divine favors or reached the level of mystical union, the spirituality in the convent was aligned with the image of the nun as “bride of Christ.” In the introduction to the obituaries, the nun-author refers to all her sisters as “the consecrated spouses of our Saviour,”<sup>128</sup> who evidently came to religious life in search of a greater union with God through prayer and contemplation.

#### 4. “The Art of Dying and Living Wel”

Since the text at hand is a collection of obituary notices, it seems fitting to comment on how the nuns recorded the deaths of their sisters. In fact, the death scenes give perhaps the most insight into the early modern sacramental vision through which the nuns viewed their life, identity, and eternal destiny. Death itself was an integral part of the community life; the text represents the sisters gathering around the bedside of the dying nun, along with her “spirituall and ghostly fathers,” to pray and accompany their sister in her last moments. The scenes communicate a sense of sacredness: the sufferings, virtues, and last words of the sister carefully recorded and illuminated with commentary on their significance. Death was seen within the greater context of the sister’s entire life project of attaining eternal salvation; it was, in fact, the culminating moment of these efforts for a holy life, to arrive “to such an art of Dying and Living wel.”<sup>129</sup> This is reflected in the sisters’ attitude towards death. For example, Justina Corham, who was consumptive since she was a teenager, “thirsted excessively to be Dissolved, so to enjoy her spouse and saviour.” When the infirmarian asked her if she really wanted to die, being so young, she answered that “indeed she languish’d much to be with God and enjoy him.” The sisters record that towards the end, “she was overheard to say to herself in perfect sence and Great

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 27.



fervour of spirit: Break heart and go to thy Jesus, break heart and go to thy Jesus.”<sup>130</sup> At the same time, death was not seen as a solitary or individualistic endeavor towards God. The gathering of the other sisters around the deathbed to watch, pray, and sing was necessary for the support and consolation of the dying. This combination of the presence of the sisterly community and a sense of final union with God is summed up in the last act and words of Alexia (Catherine) Maurice, who died at age 28 after a long, painful illness. The notice reports that “She instantly turn’d on one side, inclining her head upon the bosom of one of the religious, she said with a soft Low yet Distinct voice, I go now to my Saviour.”<sup>131</sup>

Like the overall structure of the notices themselves, the death scenes reveal some recurring themes which point to the way the sisters understood the fusion of the spiritual and physical, the supernatural and natural. The first is a preoccupation with the last sacraments: whether a sister received communion, absolution, and the anointing with oils, if she was lucid when she received them, and how many days or hours before death she received them. The second is a careful recording of the feast day on or near which a sister died. Often it mentions the sister’s desire to die on the feast of one of her patron saints or a specific titular feast of the Virgin Mary. Third, there is particular consideration of the suffering body of the dying and the sacramental vision was no less operative here than in life. Finally, certain metaphors are regularly employed to describe the death and meditate on its meaning. It is these last two points that I would like to expand upon, since they offer most insight into how the sisters understood themselves as women and the impact of their religious life on this self understanding.

If, as discussed above, beauty of body was understood to communicate a sister’s inner spirituality, the suffering body was also a sign of grace and predilection. In this sense, the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 68.

Catholic sacramental vision departed from the Platonic, and found illness, deformity, and suffering another distinct manifestation of the holy. The descriptions of disease verge on the grotesque, yet the body is still identified with the spiritual: with Christ as Man of Sorrows and redemption through the cross.

The nun-author creates a contrast in the case of Alexia Maurice (mentioned above) in referring simultaneously to her “proper comly personage” and “most gracefull presence” and to the horrifying effects of accidents and disease which visited her. At one point, she was burned when fire caught about her face, which was “so tormentably scorched, that it swell’d like a monster.”<sup>132</sup> Woven throughout this description are assurances that God permitted it as a way to draw the sister to himself and beautify her with courage and the power of his grace. Evidently, through recourse to prayer, her face was healed “with out scarr or blemish.”<sup>133</sup> The same sister, however, was again chosen by Christ to “follow him close with the Load of a heavy cross” when “in the very flower and prime of her youthly vigor” she developed dropsy. The disease confined Sister Alexia to the infirmary for three years, where her body “swell’d as big as a Tun incredibly great.”<sup>134</sup> She insisted on coming down to the choir on communion days and holy days, though this “cost her an unspeakable pain and Difficulty”<sup>135</sup> and the other sisters observed in this the presence of divine strength and grace.

The other most striking example of the sacramental vision of the suffering body is in the fourth abbess, Magdalen (Elizabeth) Digby who was described as “of a more than ordinary high statue, yet withall very well proportion’d to her bigness, & accounted extraordinary handsome,

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

her humour pleasant & lively, of a Great & courageous spirit.”<sup>136</sup> After serving a term as abbess, she spent a great part of her 74 years suffering from deafness and other physical ailments. Seven years before her death, she developed “a kancker in her breast” which was figured as “an exterior sign” in several distinct ways. First, Sister Magdalen had a “heavy cross interiorly afflicted her” which was a “continuell distrust of her salvation.”<sup>137</sup> Viewed from a sacramental vantage, “this temptation of being damn’d was a perpetuall sword of sorrow at her breast” which the cancer made visible and, in some way, allowed the other sisters to participate with greater compassion in her spiritual as well as physical trial. When describing (in a rather raw and grotesque way) the final stages of the disease, the image shifts slightly to one of divine predilection. The author reports that her breast “was broken out into five holes” and “blood came guishing out in a strange & extraordinary manner, as if a spear had been thrust into her side, under her breast.” This “caused in many a reflection that as she had obtained this exterior sign, by way of feavour from God, so it remain’d to the very Last a kind of supernaturall wonder as a Dart where with the Divine Archer had wounded and made a conquest of her Love.”<sup>138</sup>

Clearly, the sisters here are applying a sacramental way of seeing the body, finding a revelation of spiritual activity within the corporeal, even in its deterioration. The image takes on a third meaning of identification with the suffering Christ in that Sister Magdalen herself was “particularly uniting the 5 sores in her breast to the 5 wounds of our Lord” during the final hours of her life. If the grace of the sacraments flowed from Christ’s Passion, one’s own bodily suffering became a means of union with Christ and participation in redemption. Meaningless, empty suffering was entirely outside of the sacramental vision of life and death in the Benedictan

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 78.

community. The decomposing body was seen to communicate various levels or layers of meaning; in the case of Sister Magdalen, her suffering was at once a manifestation of an inner spiritual trial, a sign of God's love and predilection for her which pierced her heart, and a means of union with Christ in his redemptive suffering. If, in suffering, one did not despair, then she had triumphed and overcome the final obstacle to her eternal union with God.

When referring to the actual moment of passing, the authors make use mainly of two metaphors: spousal imagery and soldier imagery. Quite often the two metaphors are combined. Sister Mary Digby is first depicted as a soldier whose weapons are the last sacraments: "For she Dyed Arm'd with all the rites of our holy mother the Church." A few lines later, the author shifts to a gentler image, explaining how "she expir'd indeed Smilling, Looking pure and fair like a bride Going to her nuptial solemnity, leaving us all much edify'd at her sweet angelical Life amongst us."<sup>139</sup> Again, Mary Pease received viaticum and absolution and "thus she went, arm'd against the assaults of the enemy, to meet her beloved spouse and saviour with her Lamp full off oyle amongst the true virgins to celebrate the eternall nuptials in the Great feast Intitle'd the Immaculate conception of the Queen of virgins."<sup>140</sup>

While the spousal imagery may not be surprising, the imagery of battle, arms, and soldiering recurs frequently and without any apology or even consideration of appropriating something that belonged to masculine identity. In fact, it is used to describe the sisters' virtue, as in the case of Sister Mary Mounson who was "indeed a valorous champion of the cross."<sup>141</sup> Only once in the entire document is there any comparison of a woman with virtue being "like a man": the case of a sister who faced trials that "might have shaken a masculine spirit."<sup>142</sup> Apart from

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 34.

that, the imagery of soldier and battle is used freely, and the strength of a woman was seen as coming, not from imitation of men, but from God, who could certainly make a woman a soldier in the spiritual life. Of Sister Mary, it was further said that “God blesst this couragious soldier of Christ’s with such necessary strength, in a weak and worn body, that all her Life in religion she strictly observed all the regular [austerities].”<sup>143</sup> Sister Alexia, who had suffered from dropsy, was pictured as finally triumphing, as the sister writes: “[God] must needs be even delighted to see her dye like a conqueror with a sword (as one may say) in her hand...[as one] entering into a field for a single combat.”<sup>144</sup> Death, then, was a passage to eternal union with the beloved, but also the final battle, wherein the sister would courageously face and conquer her “enemy”, whether that was suffering, despair, or the devil himself. After her victory, she would finally be united with her heavenly Spouse, whom she had awaited every day of her religious life, from the first day of her calling to her final agony.

## Conclusion

The obituary notices from the Benedictan monastery at Ghent depict a community of women whose lives contain more than a few paradoxes. They live cloistered, yet are hardly cut off from the concerns and happenings of their homeland. They live under obedience to a superior, yet demonstrate a form of female autonomy, initiative, and development of talents that rivals their married counterparts. They live a life of renunciation, yet are surrounded by affection and care of their sisters until the very last moment of life. They conceal themselves with habit and veil, yet recognize each other’s beauty as a sign of grace and an inspiration towards goodness. They celebrated their sisters strength and virtue, and appropriated typically male

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 68.

imagery without any reference to or disparagement of men. They live absorbed by spiritual concerns as mysterious as mystical union with an unseen God, yet find signs of this grace in their own bodies' subjection to illness, disintegration, and death. The combination of these apparently antithetical factors was made possible by the habit of thought sustained in the Catholic tradition. The sacramental vision allowed for layers of meaning and interpretation of circumstances, events, and the self which allowed women a space to develop their autonomy, spirituality, and identity. Moreover, this sacramental economy envisioned marriage and vowed chastity as two complementary forms of Christian life, which depended upon each other and therefore must both be encouraged and maintained. This, in turn, provided the framework to make such a choice and lifestyle, and eventually other variations on this life, possible and advantageous for women of the early modern period.

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